

Late Night Questions

John 3:1-17

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There are many intriguing dimensions to the Nicodemus story. Clearly, Nicodemus has some questions in mind, but the way the conversation unfolds, he never articulates any of them specifically. The reader is left wondering what questions Nicodemus found so pressing that he came out at night in search of answers. But more than this, the reader is invited to name his or her own pressing questions, the questions that don't occur to us during the day because we are occupied with much busyness, but questions that come to us at night, at bedtime, when there is quiet and few distractions.

One of my college roommates, Danny, wouldn't allow for such quiet, late night pondering time, didn't care to entertain questions of a haunting nature. There was no Nicodemus within him. Climbing into bed, he'd always put on one of those long-playing, thirty three and one third rpm records by The Lovin' Spoonful that would assure a mental distraction until sleep carried him off to a blessed escape. I often wondered what he dreamed about!

Many of us, today, across the sweep of generations, identify with Nicodemus because it's late at night that our real questions come crashing into our consciousness. It's no mystery to us why Nicodemus approaches Jesus after dark.

This being a family-oriented worship hour, and because I have the privilege of working with people in all the generations, I'd like to name and wrestle briefly with a spiritual question that arises from each generation.

When I think of children and youth, I know that one question that gets written onto the chalk board of the mind, late at night, is this: does anybody really love me? Though there are lots of people who love each child, children have a way of allowing the negative voices to trump the positive voices, leaving them with an uncertainty as to their worth. Ninety nine 'I love you's' can be silenced by one "I hate you."

The story of Barrington Bunny comes to mind. In this fable, a bunny is feeling so unloved it hurts. He hops through the snow ignored by the squirrels and abandoned by the beavers and out of touch with other bunnies. He says out loud, 'I'm not good for anything.' And then Barrington hears the mysterious voice of the silver wolf who calls out to him, 'Bunnies are warm and furry. Bunnies can hop! Bunnies are very very good.' This is a powerful voice he hears. Though he may have heard similar words before, he hasn't believed them until now. For Barrington, this moment is a birth, a re-birth. It is the kind of moment every child yearns for.

My turn for doing the devotions at Salmon Brook happened to fall on Valentine's Day this week. I went there thinking I'd tell a romantic story, Jacob falling in love with Rebecca, Jesus turning the water into wine at a wedding. But when I got there I told them the story of the disciples arguing among themselves over which of them was the greatest. I got to the part where Jesus picks up a child and says to the twelve, 'unless you turn and become like this child you'll never enter the kingdom of heaven.' Historically, when we study this passage, we focus on the disciples and the transformation that needs to occur within their hearts, a movement from arrogance to humility. But in that setting at Salmon Brook, as I was telling the story for the one thousandth time, the focus shifted to the child Jesus was holding. For that child, held in those strong arms, it would have been a moment when her late night question was finally answered.

For this child there is movement from not knowing for sure whether anyone loves me to knowing for sure I am loved. This is every child's question. And every child deserves a definitive answer, an undoubtable assurance.

One day this week, as I was writing this sermon, I looked out my window toward High Street and I saw something that brought tears of great joy! I saw a long line of Kindergarten children waiting for the school bus to take them to Hopewell School. This was at 12:30. The bus arrived and what I saw was this: as each child moved to step onto the bus, their YMCA leader bent over and kissed each child on the head! Every child got a kiss! I saw that and I sat there sobbing, knowing those children know they are loved! I ran out and thanked that YMCA worker for loving those children.

When I think about the mid-life generation, when we can no longer claim to be a teenager and before we start thinking about receiving a Social Security check, I think of this population approaching Jesus with a different late night question. For those of us in this generation, our Nicodemus question may be: 'am I doing anything that matters? I get up in the morning; I go off to work to earn an honest dollar; I come home at night. Does anything I do really matter?' This may have been the very question Nicodemus had at the top of his list that night. He was a Pharisee, a highly respected Biblical scholar, a teacher, a neighbor, perhaps a husband. I can imagine him asking Jesus whether any of this matters. And I have heard this question raised repeatedly by the middle generation.

To wrestle with this late night question we need to move our location to the Garden of Gethsemane and look in on Jesus as he wrestles with a very similar question. On the eve of his arrest, we see him agonizing over whether his life has mattered. And his agonizing leads him to the shortest yet most profound prayer ever uttered, 'not my will, but thy will be done.'

It is a moment of sweet surrender. Christ comes to this moment of knowing that his life matters when he allows his life to be a vessel of God's handiwork. When Christ prays this prayer, though his death is imminent, it is like a birth, a re-birth, an assurance that his life has mattered. Not my will, but thine be done.

On those nights when I find myself up late, unable to sleep, wondering what's keeping me awake; I will often borrow that prayer from the Garden of Gethsemane. And when I awake the next morning, there is often clarity whether my decision enables me to be a vessel for God's work in the world or not. When I see that what I have in mind is also what God has in mind, that is when I know my life matters. Perhaps that is what Nicodemus discovered, also.

When I think about my elders, the generation Tom Brokaw described as the greatest generation, men and women who have either retired or are thinking about it more and more; I imagine their late night, Nicodemus question might be: what are the things I need to do before I die? I know it is a risk to presume to state someone else's question. But I decided to take the risk. What do I need to do before I die?

One hint to the answer to this question came to us at the memorial service for Doctor Bill Lohman. At that service, one of the eulogists was doctor Bob Drury who referred us to the Hippocratic Oath where seasoned physicians are duty bound to pass along to younger, less experienced doctors all the wisdom they have gained over the course of their career. Dr. Drury described Dr. Lohman as having been particularly faithful to that part of the Oath, and that he, Bob Drury, the younger doctor in this case, had been the beneficiary of Bill Lohman's wisdom. I was very moved by those words.

It strikes me that what we all need to do before we die is to share with the younger ones whatever wisdom we have gained. Moses did that at the end of his long life. When he could see that it was the sunset he was looking at and no longer the sunrise, he invited the younger ones into his tent. Before he died, there was this one bit of wisdom he needed to share. He told the future generations that every day God sets before them a choice. They can make choices that are life-giving and they are free to make choices that are life-denying. And then he said those words that resound through all the centuries, "Choose life!"

So, I have this wild hope that our elders will choose to share with us the wisdom of their life experience. What would you tell us about falling in love? What would you tell us about respecting the earth? What would tell us about eternal life? What would you tell us about happiness? What would you tell us about being a disciple of Jesus Christ? What would you tell us about being born anew? Before you die, what is the one bit of wisdom you need to pass along for the sake of humankind? For the sake of the church? For the sake of peace?

Nicodemus had his questions. Every generation has its questions. At this church, each question is honored. Indeed, it is our commitment to hear and to honor each other's questions. There's a little of Nicodemus in all of us! Pay attention to those late night questions, the ones that keep you up at night. Often, they are the ones worth heeding! This is what I wanted to say to all the South Church families, in the greatest of hope. Amen.

